

Sicily

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Escorted & Package Tours

Before you start your search for the lowest airfare, you may want to consider booking your flight as part of a travel package. Package tours are not the same thing as escorted tours. Package tours are simply a way to buy the airfare, accommodations, and other elements of your trip (such as car rentals, airport transfers, and sometimes even activities) at the same time and often at discounted prices -- kind of like one-stop shopping. Packages are sold in bulk to tour operators -- who resell them to the public at a cost that usually undercuts standard rates.

One good source of package deals is the **airlines** themselves. Most major airlines offer air/land packages, as do several big **online travel agencies** (such as Expedia, Travelocity, Orbitz, Site59, and Lastminute.com).

Package operators are often advertised in the travel section of your local Sunday newspaper. Or check ads in national travel magazines such as *Travel & Leisure*, *National Geographic Traveler*, and *Condé Nast Traveler*.

Package tours can vary by leaps and bounds. Some offer a better class of hotels than others. Some offer the same hotels for lower prices. Some offer flights on scheduled airlines, while others book charters. Some limit your choice of accommodations and travel days. You are often required to make a large payment upfront. On the plus side, packages can save you money, offering group prices but allowing for independent travel. Some even let you add on a few guided excursions or escorted day trips (also at prices lower than if you booked them yourself) without booking an entirely escorted tour.

Before you invest in a package tour, get some answers. Ask about the **accommodations choices** and prices for each. Then look up the hotels' reviews in a Frommer's guide and check their rates online for your specific dates of travel. You'll also want to find out what type of room you get. If you need a certain type of room, ask for it; don't take whatever is thrown your way. Request a nonsmoking room, a quiet room, a room with a view, or whatever you fancy.

Finally, look for **hidden expenses**. Ask whether airport departure fees and taxes, for example, are included in the total cost.

Escorted General-Interest Tours

Escorted tours are structured group tours, with a group leader. The price usually includes everything from airfare to hotels, meals, tours, admission costs, and local transportation.

Many people derive a certain ease and security from escorted trips. Escorted tours -- whether by bus, motor coach, train, or boat -- let travelers sit back and enjoy their trip without having to spend lots of time behind the wheel or worrying about details. You know your costs upfront, and there are few surprises. Escorted tours can take you to the maximum number of sights in the minimum amount of time with the least amount of hassle -- you don't have to sweat over the plotting and planning of a vacation schedule. Escorted tours are particularly convenient for people with limited mobility. They can also be a great way to make new friends.

On the downside, an escorted tour often requires a big deposit upfront, and lodging and dining choices are predetermined. You'll get little opportunity for serendipitous interactions with locals. The tours can be jam-packed with activities, leaving little room for individual sightseeing, whim, or adventure -- plus they also often focus only on the heavily touristed sites, so you miss out on the lesser-known gems.

Before you invest in an escorted tour, ask about the **cancellation policy**: Is a deposit required? Can they cancel the trip if they don't get enough people? Do you get a refund if they cancel? If *you* cancel? How late can you cancel if you are unable to go? When do you pay in full? **Note**: If you choose an escorted tour, think strongly about purchasing trip-cancellation insurance, especially if the tour operator asks you to pay upfront.

You'll want to get a complete **schedule** of the trip to find out how much sightseeing is planned each day and whether enough time has been allotted for relaxing or wandering solo.

The **size** of the group is also important to know upfront. Generally, the smaller the group, the more flexible the itinerary, and the less time you'll spend waiting for people to get on and off the bus. Find out the **demographics** of the group as well. What is the age range? What is the gender breakdown? Is this mostly a trip for couples or singles?

Discuss what is included in the **price**. You may have to pay for transportation to and from the airport. A box lunch may be included in an excursion, but drinks might cost extra. Tips may not be included. Find out if you will be charged if you decide to opt out of certain activities or meals.

Finally, if you plan to travel alone, you'll need to know if a **single supplement** will be charged and if the company can match you up with a roommate.

Italiatour, part of the Alitalia Group (tel. **800/845-3365**; www.italiatourusa.com), offers the best escorted tours of Sicily. The most attractive deal is a 9-day, 7-night jaunt from \$2,099 round-trip that takes in such highlights as Catania, Ragusa, Agrigento, Palermo, and Giardini-Naxos (the latter the "beachfront" for Taormina). Of all the tours we've studied, this one best encapsulates the highlights. Because of the company's close link with Alitalia, the prices quoted are sometimes among the most reasonable on the market.

Amelia International (tel. **800/742-4591**; www.ameliainternational.com) specializes in Sicily and its Mediterranean neighbors. Custom-designed tours of Sicily last 11 days and cost from \$5,200 per person, double occupancy (land charges only). You spend 4 nights in Palermo, 1 night in Agrigento, 2 nights in Syracuse, and 3 nights in Taormina. Highlights of the trip include visits to the Aeolian Islands, a journey to the medieval village of Erice, and a jeep ride along the craters of Mount Etna.

One of the biggest escorted-tour operators is **Perillo Tours** (tel. **800/431-1515**; www.perillotours.com). Since it was founded in 1945, it has sent more than a million travelers to Italy. Perillo's tours cost much less than you'd spend if you arranged a comparable trip yourself. Accommodations are in first-class hotels, and guides tend to be well qualified. Tours in Sicily also include time in southern Italy, including 3 nights in Rome and 3 nights in Sorrento. The swing through Sicily itself, part of a larger tour, usually takes in 2 nights in Palermo, 1 night in Agrigento, and 3 nights in Taormina.

Globus and Cosmos Tours, working jointly, comprise one of Perillo's top competitors. **Globus** (tel. **866/755-8581**; www.globusandcosmos.com) also offers a 14-day grand tour of Italy and Sicily. **Cosmos** (tel. **800/276-1241**), the budget branch of Globus, sells the same

itineraries. These tours must be booked through a travel agent and not directly.

Yet another option is **Insight Vacations** (tel. **800/582-8380**; www.insightvacations.com), which features art tours. Its 10-day tour of Italy and Sicily includes stopovers at the seaside resort of Giardini-Naxos (below Taormina) and visits to the temples at Agrigento and the art treasures of Palermo.

For a luxury tour, consider **Abercrombie & Kent** (tel. **800/554-7016** or 630/954-2944; www.abercrombiekent.com). Its 12-day tour of southern Italy includes Palermo, Agrigento, Piazza Armerina, Syracuse, and Taormina, with the option of adding a few nights in Rome to the itinerary.

Special-Interest Trips

For many visitors, a themed tour is the best way to explore the island.

For those who'd like to cycle along volcanic craters and rugged coastlines, in sight of Greek ruins, an intriguing 10-day biking tour is offered by **VBT** (tel. **800/BIKE-TOUR**; www.vbt.com). It costs from \$2,595 per person, including accommodations (airfare not included). Bike trips circle the craters of Mount Etna and go to Taormina and on to some of the Aeolian Islands, including Lipari and Salina.

Hikes through ancient Sicily are organized through **Mountain Travel-Sobek** (tel. **888/687-6235** or 510/594-6000; www.mtsobek.com). Depending on the number in your group, 9-day tours (land costs only) range from \$3,790 to \$4,090 per person. Hikes go through Palermo, Piazza Armerina, and the temples of Agrigento, and even include wine tasting in Corleone, of Mafia fame.

Backroads (tel. **800/462-2848** or 510/527-1555; www.backroads.com), runs a 6-day biking and walking trip through Sicily that incorporates a boat ride to the Aeolian island of Panarea. It even offers a family version of this trip that's suitable for children as young as 9 years old. Both trips are around \$3,300 per person (land costs only), double occupancy.

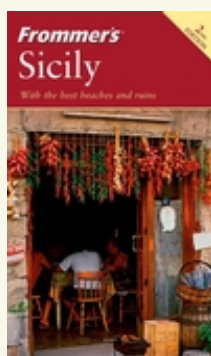
Butterfield & Robinson (tel. **800/678-1147** or 416/864-1354; www.butterfield.com) operates a ship-based tour that takes in Sicily and the Aeolian Islands by 32-passenger private yacht. Days bring opportunities for hiking, swimming, snorkeling, and diving. The 9-day tour starts at \$8,950 per person (airfare not included).

Smithsonian Journeys (tel. **877/338-8687** or 202/357-4700; www.smithsonianjourneys.org) features educational travel with guides who are experts in their fields. The 11-day "Crossroads of Cultures" trip aboard a private yacht visits Sicily, the Aeolian Islands, and Malta, while the 11-day "Legacy of Sicily" tour explores the island in greater depth.

Academic Tours (tel. **800/875-9171** or 718/417-8782; www.academictours.com) is a real Sicilian specialist. It offers the best archaeological tours of Sicily, visiting such ancient cities and sites as Segesta, Erice, Selinunte, Piazza Armerina, Noto, and Syracuse. Typical prices for land arrangements are \$1,899 in a double room for a 15-day tour.

To Grandmother's House We Go (tel. **718/768-4662**; www.tograndmothershousewego.com) features cooking and cultural tours of Sicily. Cooking classes concentrate on simple, delicious food, and no more than 10 people participate at one time. The tour comprises not only food, but also historical sights as well as living history -- that is, the shops of artisans, a winery, a tuna fishery, and more.

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